

The Sirens: threatening song

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What do the heavy metal band *Nightwish*, the video game *Star Control*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, police cars, and the Starbucks logo share in common? Little, apart from that they all draw on the idea of Sirens, those mythical maidens of the sea, famed for luring sailors to their death with their enchanting song. The Sirens' ancient song of seduction and destruction rings on, in various forms, right into the present day. This article traces its path back more than two and a half millennia, to Homer's *Odyssey* and slightly beyond, to explore some troubling questions about poetry, song, and the lure of the female voice.

Odysseus and the Sirens: resisting wilful seduction

'First you will come to the Sirens, who beguile all men who come to them. Whoever in ignorance draws near to them and hears their voice, his wife and little children never stand beside him and rejoice at his homecoming; instead the Sirens beguile him with their clear-toned song, as they sit in a meadow, and about them is a great heap of bones of mouldering men, and round the bones the skin is shrivelling.'

Homer, *Odyssey* 12

Thus warns the sorceress Circe, as she sends the much-suffering Odysseus on his homeward way. In the epic, the Sirens form part of a chain of women, nymphs, and goddesses who, with their power to charm and seduce, threaten the hero's all-important homecoming to Ithaca, following the war at Troy.

Circe proceeds to issue him the following instructions:

'Row past them and anoint the ears of your comrades with sweet wax...for fear any of the rest may hear. But if you yourself desire to listen, let them bind you in the swift ship, hand and foot upright in the step of the mast...so that, with delight, you may listen to the voice of the two Sirens. And if you shall implore and command your comrades to free you, then let them bind you with yet more bonds.'

Homer, *Odyssey* 12

Events take their course just as Circe predicts and Odysseus follows her every instruction. From here stems the famous image of the mighty hero straining at his bonds, bonds that he himself has instructed his comrades to tie. The warrior is bound so as to resist the lure of the Sirens' seductive tones, tones that he nonetheless cannot resist listening to. Paradoxes abound and the physical tension contained in the image evokes the psychological tension of the scenario.

Songs and singers compete

The danger posed by the Sirens is greater still. Certainly this is a case of seductive, feminine song threatening male action and purpose. However, there is danger on a poetic level as well: the Sirens' song threatens to destroy another song, the very song in which it appears, the song of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus', and so Homer's, song.

To understand this, we need only turn to the words of their song, as quoted by Odysseus:

'Come hither on your way, renowned Odysseus, great glory of the Achaeans; stop your ship that you may listen to the voice of us two. For never yet has any man rowed

past the island...until he has heard the sweet voice from our lips; instead, he has joy of it, and goes his way a wiser man. For we know all the toils that in wide Troy the Argives and Trojans endured through the will of the gods, and we know all things that come to pass upon the fruitful earth.'

Homer *Odyssey* 12

The Sirens' seductive power lies not just in their 'sweet voiced' tones, but in their words: the knowledge that they offer to impart is essentially that of the Trojan War. It is the story of the *Iliad*; the very poem that the *Odyssey* forms a continuation of, and against which it seeks to define itself. For Odysseus to answer the Sirens' call would be to return to events at Ilium and to reject his return home. While the fame of the Iliadic heroes rests on their toils and achievements at Troy as commemorated by the *Iliad*, Odysseus' fame depends on his homecoming and on people hearing the tales of his wanderings as sung by the hero himself. If Odysseus were to yield to the temptation of the Sirens' song, he would perish on their island. There would be no homecoming, no singing of his tale, and so no *Odyssey*.

With this in mind, the image of the hero bound to the mast of his ship while hearing the Sirens' enchanting song gains further meaning: the ropes with which Odysseus is tied become akin to the strings of the bard's lyre; their ability to restrain him hails the victory of bardic song over that of the Sirens.

Nonetheless, some questions remain. Does Odysseus and does the *Odyssey* in fact triumph over the Sirens? Did the hero, from the safety of his ship, really hear the true song of the Sirens? Or is that reserved for those who give themselves fully to the Sirens' seduction?

One could say that Odysseus was not in fact saved, and that the *Odyssey* did not in fact triumph in the contest of voices since, after hearing the Sirens' song, Odysseus is condemned to repeat it forever in the words of the *Odyssey*. Moreover, their song has spilled far beyond the confines of the poem and continues to ring independently, right into the present.

Lyre against voice

It is perhaps out of dissatisfaction with the *Odyssey*'s ambivalent victory over the Sirens that a later Greek poet, Apollonius of Rhodes (3rd century B.C.), chose to frame another singing hero's encounter with the Sirens as a more decisive victory for poetry. In his epic, the *Argonautica*, he has Orpheus play on his lyre more beautifully than the Sirens could sing and thereby save the other Argonauts from listening to the Sirens' song. Indeed, the reader too is prevented from hearing their song:

*The lyre defeated the virgins' voice
The west-wind and echoing wave, rushing from the
prow,
Carried the ship on. They sang on indistinctly.*

Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica* 4

Orpheus' victory over the Sirens must be seen as one of civilized, ordered, music – song accompanied by a technological instrument, the lyre – over the song of a primal, almost bestial nature. Significantly, Apollonius of Rhodes presents the Sirens as part woman, part bird. Both Orpheus and the Sirens are descended from the Muses; both possess the power of enchanted music. But while the Sirens, however seductive, are fundamentally beasts

that prey on men, the man and ideal poet, Orpheus, was so marvellous a player on the lyre that he could charm and in this case drown out the enchantment of these wild beasts of song with his music.

And yet, here too, we have reason to doubt the instrument's ability to outdo the Sirens' song. We have only to look at the premise underlying our own, English vocabulary of enchantment for a powerful argument in support of the seductive power of the human voice. The verb 'to enchant' derives directly from the Latin *incantare*, which means literally 'to sing a magic spell over someone'. Lyres may have their magic, but if not sung by a human voice can music really *enchant*? Etymology would imply that it cannot.

The Sirens' message: a note to singers and listeners

The legend of the Sirens and their song is one that explores the relationship between singer and audience, and gives rise to some compelling questions: what does the listener expect from song and from the singer? To be beguiled? Informed? Challenged? Does the voice have a stronger pull on the listener's emotions than the instrument? Does it speak a more profound truth? Is the voice of a woman especially alluring/threatening? Of what does this threat consist?

Above all, the Sirens challenge us to consider the question of the extent to which the audience should surrender to the enchantment of the song. Is it wise for the audience always to accept the invitation? Where might it lead? The emotions of the audience must be engaged with the music, but they must preserve their capacity to think and judge.

This tense balance is precisely what Odysseus, the listening singer, achieves: bound to the mast of his ship, he listens and engages his passions. Nevertheless, maintaining his critical faculties, he remains at bay, refusing to be lured by the Sirens' call. To have yielded to their seduction, and indeed to the call of his own passions, would have spelt the end of his song, a song in which that of the Sirens rings on.

Hannah Rosenfelder graduated in Classics from Downing College, Cambridge, in 2005. She is currently juggling her vocal studies at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama with work as a freelance writer. Her research into Sirens and the seductive lure of the female voice will form the subject for a forthcoming documentary for BBC Radio.